

Afognak — Ag'waneq

UNA AG'WANERMIU'AQ. – THIS ONE IS AN AFOGNAK PERSON.



Photo: Aerial view of the Afognak Village area, 2012.

Afognak Island lies at the northern end of the Kodiak Archipelago, just a few miles from the tip of Kodiak Island. It is the second-largest island in the region, covering more than 780 square miles. Like much of Kodiak, Afognak is mountainous with an intricate coastline. Islets dot a shoreline broken by long narrow fjords. The island is unique, however, in that it is heavily forested. Over the last 900 years, the forest of the Kenai Peninsula spread gradually south, blanketing Afognak Island with a lush cover of spruce trees and sphagnum moss.

One of Afognak's best-known features is the Afognak River, a productive salmon stream that empties into Afognak Bay on the southern end of the Island. The banks of this river have been occupied for millennia. Archaeological data indicate that Alutiiq people harvested resources here repeatedly over the past seven thousand years. In the historic era, Russian-American Company laborers built a dam in the river, called a zapor, to trap spawning salmon. Alutiiq people harvested and dried these fish, which were used both to feed company workers and the Native community.

By the 1830s, numerous families lived in Afognak village, a community to the west of the river mouth. The village had two distinct parts. Aleut Town, at one end, was home to Alutiiq families. Russian Town, at the other end, housed retired Russian men, their Native wives, and their Creole children. The community had vegetable gardens, a fleet of wooden rowboats, and a Russian Orthodox Church.

Afognak remained a thriving community until 1964 when tsunamis following the Great Alaska Earthquake flooded the village. Seawater washed away many buildings, damaged others, and polluted wells, forcing residents to move. The International Lions club helped to build Port Lions, a new community on the shore of nearby Kizhuyak Bay. Although Afognak village is no longer inhabited, it is not abandoned. Families continue to feel strong ties to the area. They visit the community, share it with friends and family members, and hunt and fish in the surrounding area. Afognak village remains a beloved place to many Alutiiq families.